Impact of the Economy on Health Access in East Contra Costa County

Background

There is no need to elaborate on the dire state of the American economy - it is the priority topic for daily headlines and political debate. There is strong agreement that no matter what the course of action, the economy will continue to slow and the number of unemployed will continue to rise for at least a year. Rising unemployment means more and more people losing health coverage for themselves and their families.

The economic situation is even worse locally where the California Legislature and the County Board of Supervisors struggle to address staggering budget deficits and proposed fixes could cut deeply into health and human services.

Even before the current economic situation was declared a recession, the health providers serving East Contra Costa County had begun working together to explore how to expand capacity and were working to develop a long-range Master Plan. The dramatic increase in the number of uninsured has turned this effort into an immediate need.

This briefing paper highlights the impact of the economy on the ability of residents of East Contra Costa to receive health care. It describes the capacity of the existing safety net to serve these residents and offers alternatives for public and private policy makers, health care providers and community leaders to consider strengthening the safety net at this most unusual time.

Health systems are facing potentially catastrophic consequences from the exploding demand and potential shrinking of resources.

The Countywide Situation

There are any number of ways to "slice and dice" data to illustrate how the economic downtown is impacting Contra Costa County and particularly East Contra Costa. These are a few "snapshots" that are relevant.

- In November 2007, the unemployment rate in Contra Costa County was 4.9%. By November 2008, the rate was 7.1% a 45% increase in unemployment in one year. Recently County Administrator David Twa described the rate as 9.3% and predicted it could rise to 12%. This is particularly disturbing since many of those newly unemployed have lost their health insurance along with their jobs.
- Medi-Cal applications in Contra Costa County in 2008 increased by 76% over 2007 and new Medi-Cal members in the Contra Costa Health Plan have increased 7%.
- New patients or those returning after more than a year to the County health system are up to an average of 3375 a month, a 30% increase over last year. The number of active primary care patients in the County system has increased 50% in five years.

At a time of increased need, Contra Costa County has a \$56 million budget deficit projected over a 15-month period into next year and the County Administrator directed the Health Services department to reduce its budget by \$19.5 million.

June 2009 1

The East County Problem

- Health providers in East County, including Contra Costa Health Services, La Clinica,
 Planned Parenthood, Sutter Delta and John Muir Health are all reporting extra stress on
 their primary care services targeted at low-income and uninsured. They also report seeing
 recently uninsured who are coming for these services for the first time. Patients are sicker
 and more desperate.
- La Clinica has seen a 15% increase in the number of patients and visits in the last six months compared to the same period last year. Stress and depression screenings indicate that over 60% of the patients answer positively to at least one risk factor for behavioral health issues.
- Planned Parenthood in Antioch had a 16% increase in March 2009 over March 2008 and Pittsburg was up 11%.
- In the last 6-12 months, John Muir Health reports an increase in the number of phone calls about its Mobile Health Clinic and in the number of non-Hispanic patients.
- Sutter Delta hospital reports that an increased number of patients lacking insurance simply do not pay their bill rather than seeking "charity care." Between 2007 and 2008, Sutter Delta has provided inpatient care to an increasing number of uninsured. In 2007 the percentage of hospitalized patients who were uninsured was 6%; in 2008 the percentage rose to 9.6%. A relatively high percentage of patients seen at the Sutter Delta ER present with non-urgent conditions that might have been addressed at another level; this may indicate a lack of access to primary care for non-urgent conditions.
- Kaiser Permanente's Diablo Area (which includes East Contra Costa) experienced a dramatic increase in patients applying for and receiving Charity Care through Kaiser Permanente's Medical Financial Assistance (MFA) program, which covers the cost of care, across all care settings: emergency, outpatient and inpatient.

The Safety Net in East County

There are six health care providers operating 11 sites that serve as the health care safety net for the residents of East Contra Costa County. These providers and the type of care include:

- Contra Costa County Health Centers (Federally Qualified Health Centers)
 - Pittsburg: comprehensive primary care, outpatient surgery center, dental clinic
 - Brentwood: comprehensive primary care
 - Antioch: comprehensive primary care
 - Bay Point: comprehensive primary care, dental
- La Clinica, Pittsburg: comprehensive primary care
- Planned Parenthood
 - Antioch: reproductive health, prenatal care
 - *Pittsburg:* reproductive health
- Sutter Delta Urgent Care Clinic, Antioch:
- John Muir Health Mobile Health Clinic, Brentwood
- Kaiser Permanente's Antioch Medical Center including its emergency department and inpatient care
- Contra Costa County Regional Medical Center, Martinez: emergency department, inpatient
- Sutter Delta Medical Center, Antioch: emergency department, inpatient care
- John Muir Medical Center, Concord and Walnut Creek: trauma center, emergency department, inpatient care

In addition to these recognized health care systems, individual physicians and provider groups provide care to residents.

June 2009 2

Meeting the Increased Demand

The East County providers are working to meet the increasing demand through a number of strategies:

- La Clinica has launched an ambitious project to open a new primary care facility in Far
 East Contra Costa. With a grant from John Muir/Mt. Diablo Community Health Fund,
 the organization is engaged in a fast-track planning effort to determine the appropriate
 location.
- Contra Costa Health Services has instituted a new approach to provide more
 appointments at its eight Health Centers and four mobile health clinics. The primary care
 system is searched each day to identify available appointments anywhere in the system –
 regardless of where the patient's medical home is. Appointments are then offered for that
 day. An additional 1200 slots per month have been made available through this method.
 CCHS has also asked the Board of Supervisor to create five additional physician
 positions to expand capacity.
- John Muir Health continues its Mobile Health Clinic service in Brentwood and far East County on most Saturday mornings from 9-12:00. The clinic averages 14-15 patients each Saturday with maximum capacity (depending the patients' presenting condition) of 20 per clinic. The patients have historically been a Spanish-speaking, low-income, probably undocumented population. JMH also operates the Mobile Health Clinic at other sites in East County in conjunction with the CCHS Health Care for the Homeless program during the week.
- Planned Parenthood has changed its Antioch morning medical services from
 appointments to all drop-in, hoping to accommodate more patients. They've also added a
 second clinician to Tuesday mornings, adding another 10-15 patients a week who can be
 seen. Pittsburg Planned Parenthood is almost finished with the licensing process, and will
 be adding more clinician hours.



- In addition to its Medical Financial Assistance Program, Kaiser Permanente subsidizes health coverage for over 14,000 low income residents of East and Central Contra Costa County through participation in government health insurance programs, Medi-Cal and Healthy Families. As of May 2009, Kaiser Permanente's Child Health Plan provides medical, dental, and vision coverage to 2,555 low income children in the Diablo Area who do not qualify for public health coverage programs. Kaiser Permanente also provides subsidized health coverage for over 1,100 Contra Costa individuals and families through its STEPS dues subsidy program.
- Sutter Delta Urgent Care Clinic offers a drop-in clinic for uninsured people from 6 to 10 p.m. daily. This Clinic serves newly uninsured people who have not yet applied to governmental programs and for others who, for a variety of reasons, are ineligible for either private or government health plans but do not have the resources to pay for health care. It also serves as a back-up for County and La Clinica clinics when an appointment is needed sooner than other clinics can provide.

June 2009 3

What Could Be Done: Strategies for Immediate Action

Despite their best efforts, current strategies for addressing the increased need are inadequate. Some additional options include:

Strengthen the network of Clinics to serve the recently uninsured.

- Provide support for the proposed expansion of La Clinica for capital costs, operating expenses and capitalize on the Economic Stimulus funding available to community clinics.
- Create a type of "back office line" at the County that clinics and hospitals can use to expedite urgent care for recently uninsured who need timely care.
- Expand the use of non-medical interventions including the use of, Promotoras and Health Conductors and self-care and group visits.
- Implement the Rotary "Rotacare" model of voluntary doctors providing free care at specially designated clinics in Concord and then Antioch.

Providing health coverage

to an ever-growing group of

Contra Costa residents and improving capacity will

require a shared strategy to

develop innovative and

immediate actions.

- Recruit and coordinate a cadre of volunteer doctors (and perhaps other medical providers) who would contribute time at existing clinic sites or operate a type of "free clinic" at an existing site on "off" hours.
- Support the expansion of existing safety net clinics including the Sutter Delta urgent care and John Muir Health mobile clinics.
- Support the opportunity for a collaborative partnership between Contra Costa Health services and Planned Parenthood to maintain prenatal services for low-income women at the Planned Parenthood sites.

Establish an integrated system of enrollment assistance to reach newly uninsured residents

- Enroll all eligible recipients in health coverage programs (Medi-Cal, Health Families etc.)
- Strengthen existing and/or fund a program in collaboration with the County to recruit and train volunteer (or even paid) assisters to enroll people in Medi-Cal or other public programs. Many of the recently uninsured qualify for Medi-Cal, but budget cuts have reduced the County's capacity to process Medi-Cal applications, resulting in weeks of delay. Sutter Delta, Kaiser Permanente and John Muir Health community benefit programs are willing to collaborate about such a new program.
- Create a special outreach program to assist residents who have recently lost their jobs continue health coverage through COBRA or enrollment in an appropriate program.
- Designate a County eligibility worker to expedite the processing of Medi-Cal applications for the newly uninsured.
- Assure that all children of the newly uninsured are enrolled in publicly and privately funded health coverage programs.

Support additional strategies for addressing chronic health issues that reduce resources for primary care

- Create special chronic care programs for selected chronic conditions.
- Support the Clinic Consortium Specialty Care Initiative which will increase access to specialty care for low income uninsured residents

This briefing paper was developed by Contra Costa Health Services, John Muir Health, Kaiser Permanente, La Clinica de la Raza, Planned Parenthood Shasta Diablo and Sutter Delta Medical Center.

June 2009 4

This